

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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John Claiborne Isbell, *Destins de femmes: French Women Writers, 1750–1850*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0346>

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<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0346#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-032-3

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-033-0

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-034-7

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-035-4

ISBN XML: 978-1-80511-037-8

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-038-5

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0346

Cover image: Nanine Vallain, *Freedom* (1794), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nanine_Vallain_-_Libert%C3%A9.jpg

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

9. Marie Jeanne ‘Manon’ Roland de la Platière

17 March 1754–8 November 1793



Fig. 9. Marie Jeanne ‘Manon’ Roland de la Platière. Photo by Guise (2021).
Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/09/Madame_Roland_-_mus%C3%A9e_Lambinet.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Mémoires

Seconde Arrestation

De Sainte-Pélagie, le 20 août 1793

Le vingt-quatrième jour de ma détention à l'Abbaye commençait de s'écouler ; l'espace de cette détention avait été rempli par l'étude et le travail, je l'avais principalement employé à écrire des *Notes* dont la rédaction devait se ressentir de l'excellente disposition d'esprit dans laquelle je me trouvais. L'insurrection du 31 mai, les attentats du 2

juin m'avaient pénétrée d'indignation, mais j'étais persuadée que les départements ne les verraient pas d'un œil satisfait, et que leurs réclamations, soutenues des démarches nécessaires, feraient triompher la bonne cause. Peu m'importait avec cet espoir que, dans l'instant d'une crise ou les excès de la tyrannie expirante, je tombasse victime de la haine particulière ou de la rage de quelque forcené. Le succès de mes amis, le triomphe des vrais républicains me consolait de tout à l'avance ; j'aurais subi un jugement inique ou succombé par quelque atrocité imprévue, avec le calme, la fierté, même la joie de l'innocence qui méprise la mort et sait que la sienne sera vengée. Je ne puis m'empêcher de répéter ici les regrets déjà exprimés de la perte de ces *Notes* qui peignaient si bien et les faits que j'avais connus, et les personnes dont j'avais été environnée, et les sentiments que j'éprouvais dans la succession des événements d'alors. J'apprends qu'il en est échappé quelques-unes à la destruction ; mais elles ne contiennent que les détails de ma première arrestation. Un jour peut-être la réunion de ces lambeaux offrira à quelque main amie de quoi ajouter de nouveaux traits au tableau de la vérité ...¹

Marie Jeanne 'Manon' Roland de la Platière, *née* Phlipon was born and died in Paris. *Salonnière*, muse of the Girondins, and of the Romantics after her death, she helped put her husband at the forefront of politics from 1791 to 1793. Phlipon was born on the Île de la Cité in Paris, the daughter

1 Manon Roland, *Mémoires (Extraits)*, ed. Mlle Ch. Charrier (Paris: Hatier, n.d.), p. 40.

Translation: Second Arrest

From Sainte-Pélagie [prison], 20 August 1793

The twenty-fourth day of my detention at the Abbaye was starting to end; the space of this detention had been filled by study and work, I had principally employed it to write these *Notes* whose writing should bear witness to the excellent disposition of spirit in which I found myself. The insurrection of 31 May, the lawlessness of 2 June had penetrated me with indignation, but I was persuaded that the departments would not see them with a satisfied eye, and that their demands, upheld by the necessary steps, would make the good cause triumph. With this hope, little was I concerned that in the instant of a crisis or the excesses of an expiring tyranny, I might fall victim to the particular hatred or the rage of some criminal. The success of my friends, the triumph of the true republicans consoled me of everything in advance; I would have undergone an unjust judgment or succumbed to some unforeseen atrocity, with the calm, the pride, even the joy of innocence which despises death and knows that its own will be avenged. I cannot prevent myself here from repeating the regrets already expressed at the loss of those *Notes* which painted so well both the facts I had known; and the persons I had been surrounded by; and the sentiments I felt in the succession of the events of that time. I learn that some of them have escaped destruction; but they contain only the details of my first arrest. One day perhaps the gathering of these shreds will offer some friendly hand the means to add new traits to the painting of truth ...

of a well-off engraver. Placed with a wet nurse until the age of two, she was the only one of seven children to survive. Intelligent and pious, she learned Latin and read Plutarch, the Bible, Bossuet, Montesquieu, and Voltaire. At eleven, she was put in a convent; at twenty, she lost her mother and found consolation in Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). Rousseau remained a model. In 1774, she visited Versailles. She met the economist Jean Marie Roland de La Platière in 1776, twenty years her senior, who fell in love and asked for her hand. They married in 1780, working and writing together over the ensuing years: "Mariée dans tout le sérieux de la raison," she says in her *Mémoires*.² They returned to Paris in 1791, sleeping thenceforth in separate beds. Manon Roland joined the *club des Jacobins* that year, giving several speeches there, while her salon welcomed Brissot, Pétion, Robespierre, and others. Her husband became Minister of the Interior on 23 March 1792, her salon meeting twice a week. Roland played a major role in his ministry and helped write the letter that got her husband dismissed by the King on 13 June 1792, but at his reinstatement after the fall of the Tuileries on 10 August, she contributed ever more closely to his work. She hated Danton after the September Massacres. Attacks from the Montagne led her husband to resign his post on 23 January 1793. At the arrest of the Girondins on 31 May 1793, Roland did not flee like her husband; she was arrested and imprisoned in the Abbaye, writing unexpectedly to Buzot, "puis-je me plaindre de mon infortune, lorsque de telles délices me sont réservées?"³ In prison, she had writing materials and could receive visits. She appeared before the Tribunal on 8 November 1793, six days after Gouges. Her alleged last words at the guillotine—"Ô Liberté, que de crimes on commet en ton nom!"—were an invention of the poet Lamartine.⁴ Her husband learned of her death two days later and committed suicide, as did Buzot the following year.

"La tyrannie est une parvenue, le despotisme un grand seigneur," wrote Staël. It is perhaps fitting that the Bastille, on 14 July 1789, contained exactly seven prisoners, the Marquis de Sade having been transferred out the week before. Certainly, there were dungeons prior

2 *Mémoires de Madame Roland*, ed. C.A. Dauban (Paris: Plon, 1864), p. 172.

3 *Lettres de Madame Roland*, ed. Claude Perroud, 2 vols (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1902), II p.492.

4 Roger Bellet, *La Femme au xix^e siècle: littérature et idéologie* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1985), "Lamartine et Madame Roland," p. 60.

to the Revolution—*lettres de cachet* allowed aristocrats to imprison those they found troublesome with little judicial process, and they were abolished only in 1790—but the Revolution was not without its prisons, massacring some prisoners on the spot, in September 1792, while hauling others such as Manon Roland off to the guillotine after what might best be termed a show trial. What the Terror allowed, that France had not seen previously, was the emergence of a totalitarian state. Women were not executed often in Old Regime France: the regime which executed Roland, Gouges, Charlotte Corday, and Marie Antoinette counted one murderer among those four victims, and the charge against Gouges was her suggestion in print that a return to monarchy might constitute option three for the young republic. It was, in short, a thought police. “Brûler n’est pas répondre,” said Desmoulins as his printing presses were smashed, and it is in these Romantic terms that we sense Roland’s enduring appeal.

The year is 1793. Roland has been arrested with the Girondins, released, then rearrested twenty-four hours later. Her husband has fled; she has not. She is, like Condorcet in hiding writing a vision of human perfectibility, perhaps a starry-eyed optimist. Or perhaps she has read too much Plutarch. The fact is, her tone in this text is surprising: she had lived long enough to see kangaroo trials and the September Massacres, to see the Terror begin. And this is her second arrest. Where then does her hope lie? What is the source of her “excellente disposition d’esprit”? Her talk of the departments suggests that part of her hope lies in the rest of France; not, indeed, that France could intervene in time to save her own life, but that it might yet overthrow Robespierre and his henchmen and redeem the Revolution. This is a very Girondin hope; but it is not, I think, for personal salvation. Roland was no fool, she was an experienced political operative. As she says—and this text is not *post hoc*, it was written in prison awaiting her trial—“Peu m’importait [...] que je tombasse victime [...] Le succès de mes amis, le triomphe des vrais républicains me consolait de tout à l’avance.” That is an almost Roman sentiment.

Chateaubriand wrote *Les Martyrs* in 1809, and from Marat onward, the Terror produced its share of martyrs for France’s various factions to celebrate—“Fils de saint Louis, montez au ciel!” were said to be the last words spoken to Louis XVI as he mounted to the guillotine. It is

perhaps worth noting then how hard it was, working in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 2022, to procure a copy of Roland's memoirs, memoirs which mattered so much to Lamartine. This voice from prison awaiting near-certain death, is it lacking in weight or intensity, a sort of *samizdat*? Is it not gripping, even poignant to see how the Girondins went to the guillotine *en masse*, women among them? Does it not say something about this revolution which perhaps deserves to be said and heard? "La Révolution est comme Saturne," proclaimed Desmoulins, "elle dévore ses propres enfants." In any case, holding a nineteenth-century school edition of the abridged memoirs in my hands, in the immense French national library, repository of all French knowledge, I wondered at the space devoted to Montagnards and *sans-culottes* across decades of twentieth-century scholarship, and the challenge of finding Roland in that copyright library in any modern edition.

Works

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